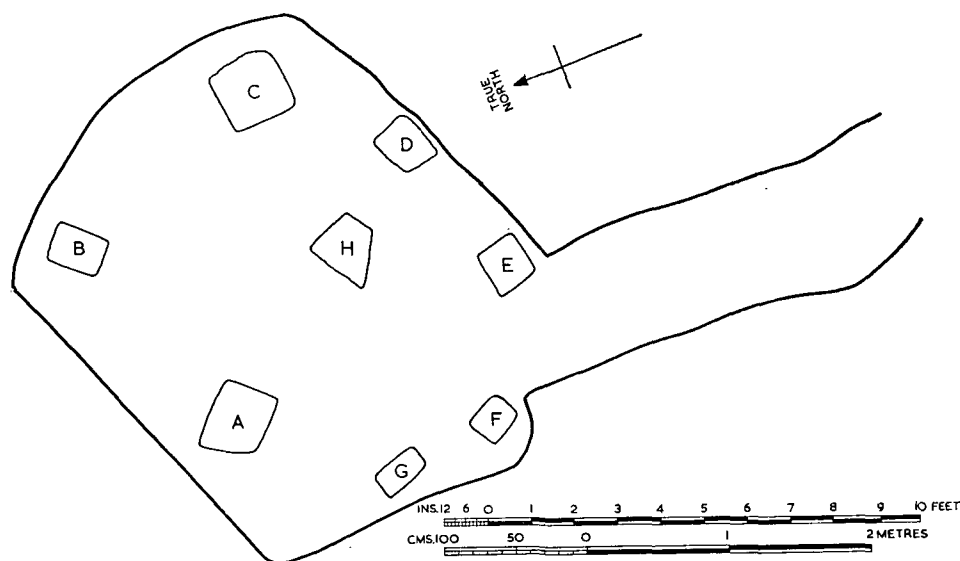


4. AN EARTH-HOUSE AT SOUTH UNIGARTH, SANDWICK, ORKNEY

ON 26th March 1958, workers of the North of Scotland Hydro-Electric Board discovered an underground chamber whilst digging a pole pit at South Unigarth on the mainland of Orkney. No antiquity was marked on the O.S. 6-in. map but the owner of the farm knew of the supposed presence of 'burials' in the place originally selected for the pole and its position was changed to avoid this spot. At the new locus the chamber of an earth-house or souterrain was discovered and the pole was again shifted to clear this structure. With the co-operation of the Hydro board the excavation was filled in until examination was possible.



EARTH-HOUSE
SOUTH UNIGARTH ORKNEY

MINISTRY OF WORKS
EDINBURGH MAY 1958

FIG. 3

Mr J. Spence, the Ministry of Works' foreman in Orkney, reported the find and an examination of the site was later made by the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments with the co-operation of the owner, Mr Sinclair.

No attempt was made to carry out a full excavation. The pit already made was re-opened and access to the structure gained by removing one of the roof slabs and dropping into the chamber.

Neither the site nor the farm-house of South Unigarth appear on the present edition of the O.S. 6-in. map. The farm stands 450 yds. SSW. of the SE. end of the Loch of Skail (N.G.R. 246174). The present farm-house is aligned north and south with a walled garden in front. From the SE. corner of this garden a post and wire fence continues in a southerly direction. The chamber of the earth-house lies 66 ft. south of the corner mentioned and is offset 12 ft. from the fence in a westerly direction.

The nature of the site is shown on the plan (fig. 3). A rock-cut passage extends in a NE.

direction for 9 ft. Earth has spilled into this, filling it almost completely at the entrance and tapering away to an inch or two on the chamber floor. Because of this filling the nature of the entrance could not be determined. Large lintel stones 18–24 in. wide and 9 in. thick span the passage, their ends resting on the soft rock.

The chamber is sub-rectangular, measuring 12 ft. from east to west by 9 ft. 6 in. from north to south. The east wall has a fairly marked curvature. The chamber is merely a pit excavated in the rock, the upper layers of which are, at this point, rather rotten and easily quarried. Pick marks are still visible on the walls. One to two in. of mud covered the floor.

Seven pillars are ranged round the walls to carry the weight of the roofing slabs; another is offset from the centre of the chamber. Six of these are orthostatic blocks. The other two, A and H on plan, are pillars made from two cubical blocks of stone. In the case of pillar A three small flags have had to be inserted as packing immediately below the roof. These two pillars bear a large water-worn slab which acts as the central part of the roof, giving head-room of 2 ft. 8 in. Other large slabs are laid on top of this and radiate outwards.

Only one small find was made. This was a hammerstone which might be of any date and lay in the passage-way near its junction with the chamber.

The monument falls readily into place as a member of one group of Orcadian earth-houses. These are excavated in soft or decomposed rock and no masonry lines the walls. Mithouse¹ and Pierowall² form good parallels, although the passage in the latter sloped down at a steep angle. In contrast the second group, represented by monuments such as Rennibister³ and Grainbank,⁴ whilst similar in plan and roofing structure, have passages and chambers lined with a masonry revetment.

P. R. RITCHIE

¹ *P.S.A.S.*, LXV (1930-1), 358.

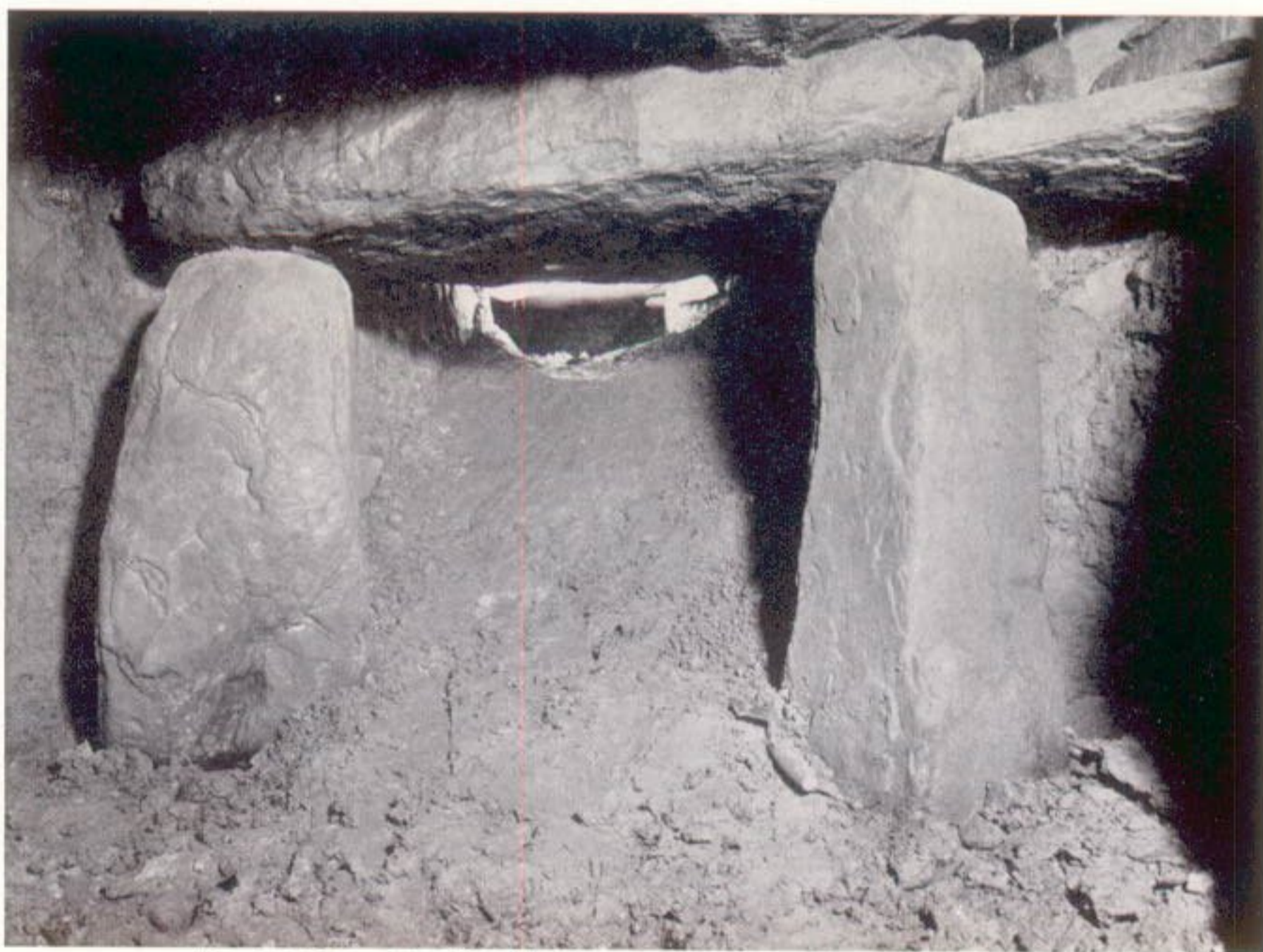
² *R.C.A.M.* (Orkney), No. 1037; *P.S.A.S.*, LXIV (1929-30), 224.

³ *P.S.A.S.*, LXI (1926-7), 296.

⁴ *R.C.A.M.* (Orkney), No. 409.



South Unigarth: Pillar A supporting the central flagstone of the roof



South Unigarth: The filled-up passage seen from the chamber